

Witches and Africans

Reporting on more serious problems in Africa

Witchcraft is one of the most potent and 'dreaded' superstitions in Africa. Most Africans believe witches are real active beings that can act to influence, intervene and alter the course of human life for good or ill. Africans accept witchcraft as an explanation, or perception and interpretation of their problems, events, nature and reality. They believe witches can cause poverty, diseases, accidents, business failures, natural disasters, infertility and childbirth difficulties. Many people in Africa attribute any extraordinary, mysterious or inexplicable event or phenomenon to witchery and wizardry.

In some African communities there is even a talk about positive and negative witchcraft. The belief is that positive witchcraft is used to do good, cure diseases or solve problems, and negative witchcraft is used to do evil. But generally, in Africa, witchcraft is associated with evil, harm and destruction.

The human angle

Africans believe witches and wizards are spirits, but that they carry out their nefarious activities as human beings, animals or insects. The belief is that witches and wizards transform into other bodies to perpetrate their evil machinations. In countries like Nigeria, Cameroon, Ghana, Malawi and Uganda, witches are identified mostly with women or infants. In Nigeria, all nocturnal

insects and animals, especially birds, are suspected of being witches or wizards. In the Gambia or Senegal, witches are associated with the owl. Witches are believed to operate mainly at night, allegedly organising nocturnal meetings in the seas and forests, where they feast on human blood, flesh or fetuses.

The general belief is that witches and wizards always convene to plan evil. They gather to plot how to inflict harm on people, especially their family members. As a result of this, throughout Africa witchcraft accusation in families is common. People blame their parents, husbands, wives, children, uncles and aunts or grandparents for any evil or misfortune that befalls them, even those they caused for themselves.

In most cases these accusations have led to ostracism, persecution, torture, and inhuman and degrading treatment or outright killing of alleged witches.

Witch hunting

So while witch hunting is a thing of the past in Europe and the entire western world, in Africa it is still an ongoing activity. Witch attacks, persecution and killings still take place on the continent. Incidentally, most of the victims are women and children.

Recently there have been several reported cases of witch attacks and killings in different parts of the continent. In Eastern Cape of South



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Africa, a woman, her daughter, and grandson were hacked to death for allegedly practicing witchcraft. In Ghana a woman, Samata Karim, was almost lynched by a mob on the suspicion that she was a witch. The mob went after Samata after a neighbour said she dreamt and saw Samata strangling her to death.

During my recent visit to Ghana, I was told that a witch camp — a place where women suspected to be witches are kept — exists in a Northern part of the country. In Uganda, three women suspected as witches were lynched in Kitgum. The women were accused of using witchcraft to kill a man in the district.

In 2004, in Edo State, Nigeria, 27 men and women suspected to be witches and wizards died after they were forced to drink a local concoction believed to be for witch identification. And in June this year a 70-year-old man killed his grandson in Kaduna in Northern Nigeria. He alleged that the son used witchcraft to kill his three children in quick succession. In Tanzania and Mozambique there have been reported incidents of killing, torture and maiming of persons in the name of witchcraft.

Witch confession

One of the most intriguing aspects of the belief in witchcraft is witch confession — the claim that witches and wizards sometimes openly admit to indulging in occult activities. Believers in witchcraft often cite — and use — this as a justification for attack and persecution.

For instance in 1998 in Lagos, a middle aged woman was stoned and later burnt to death after she allegedly confessed to have indulged in witchcraft activities. The woman reportedly confessed to have killed ten people including her own kids as well as being responsible for the repatriation of her brother from Europe. Unfortunately, as in all cases of witch confession, no one tried to critically examine or confirm these claims. No one tried to find out if this woman was mentally sound.

At best, witch confessions are utterances elicited under duress by a

mob, or pronouncements made by individuals of questionable mental health.

Besides, in some cultures in Nigeria, witch confession is believed to be therapeutic. Among the Okpameri people in Southern Nigeria, witch confession is believed to be curative. So those suffering prolonged and complicated ailments are urged 'to confess and be healed'. Also in Pentecostal churches, witch confession is perceived as a process of spiritual rebirth and recreation.

The Christian confusion

As in other aspects of African life and society, Christianity has been confusing and complicating efforts to understand and eradicate witchcraft and to realise social and cultural progress. Though the belief in witchcraft predates the advent of Christianity to Africa, over the centuries the Christian faith has spread and succeeded in reinforcing and appropriating this primitive belief. Many churches in Africa organise fellowships and revival meetings to cast out the demons of witchcraft and counteract their occult activities.

The Bible enjoins believers not to suffer witches to live. So today, Pentecostal churches, with their literalist approach to the Bible, are championing a neo-witch hunt in Africa. In 2003 at least 25 people suspected of being witches and wizards were clubbed or hacked to death in Akwa Ibom State in Southern Nigeria. The killings started after some members of the Christian churches accused their congregation's parents and relatives of allegedly practicing witchcraft and being responsible for poverty, diseases, business failure, infertility and other calamities that befell them. As a result, some children attacked their parents, grandparents and relatives to elicit confession for their alleged participation in witchcraft activities. So Christians in Africa torture, persecute and kill those alleged to be witches because their Bible tells them so.

Actually, witches are imaginary beings with no real existence. Witches

are fantasies crafted by human beings out of fear and ignorance. Witchcraft is an offshoot of the spiritualist and supernatural worldview which prevailed at the infancy of the human race. Most Africans believe that witches cause poverty, disease, accidents, business failures, famine, earthquake, infertility and other calamities that befall humankind, but there is no evidence for this. Witchcraft has no basis in reason, science or in reality. The time has come for Africans to abandon this primitive belief and the atrocious crimes of witch attack, torture, persecution and killing.

The time has come for Africans to abandon superstition and embrace science.

Skepticism in action

In August 2007, I travelled with some Nigerian Skeptics to Umuchieze — a rural community in Imo State — where we met with a couple who were almost lynched by a Christian mob for witchcraft.

In February, Gabriel and Celine Ogu were alleged to have indulged in witchcraft activities. Gabriel was accused of sucking the blood of infants in a local school where he works as a driver, while Celine was said to be responsible for the death of many family members, including her own children. The villagers mobilised and wanted to lynch the couple, but they were saved by the prompt intervention of Dr Enyeribe Onuoha, traditional ruler of the community and the Chair of the Nigerian Humanist Movement, who called in the police.

At the end of the day, the mob destroyed the couple's bicycle, chairs, and cut down some food crops in the compound. With the support of the Center for Inquiry, Nigerian Skeptics bought a new bicycle, four chairs and a bench, which were donated to the couple at a short ceremony at the Palace of Dr Onuoha. We urged the couple to forgive and not to seek vengeance on anyone who might have aided or abetted the attack on them and the destruction of their property. Skeptics care. 